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ABSTRACT

Historical archaeology enables students to confront the mythology of the past with real knowledge about the past and thus provides them with significant insight and understanding. Students are often presented with an ideological past, both in textbooks and museums, that never really existed. For example, people often come away from living historical museums with the idea that the past represents simpler and more pure times. Archaeology, however, strives to uncover the full spectrum of life from the lower rungs of society to the highest. Only when students are confronted with archaeological evidence, such as the existence of privies next to water wells, illustrating the 18th century's lack of germ theory does the separation of myth and reality occur, confronting the mind with a more real past. (Author/KC)

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Ordinary People: The Role of Historical Archeology in Understanding American History

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The paper title, listed above, could well be expanding to- Ordinary People: The Role of Archeology in Understanding Humanity. In other words, what I have to say really does not need to be restricted to that temporal period we label American History. Whatever title one chooses, my goals for this paper are threefold. First, I would like to examine the nature of the past- the past we hope to help people understand. Second, I would like to look at how we typically reconstruct the past- that is, how we create our myths about the past. And finally, third, I would like to make some suggestions about how we might go about learning from, and teaching students about the real past. My overall basic contention is, of course, that an anthropological perspective is essential to presenting and truly understanding the past. In addressing these goals, I would like to draw upon my experiences as an archeologist formally on the staff of a living historical museum known as the National Colonial Farm.

The National Colonial Farm is situated along the Potomac River outside of Washington, D. C. It sits on the opposite shore directly across from George Washington's plantation, Mount Vernon. Originally, the land was put aside the protect the view from Mount Vernon but it has since been somewhat developed to recreate and represent a typical pre-Revolutionary War tidewater farmstead. Each year hundreds of school children are guided through by

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Paper read at the 81st Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association on 4 December 1982 in Washington, D.C.

interpretors. Children and adults tour the farm structures, the fields, and they view crop and animal types similar to those which the original settlers themselves once grew. The farm is simply a pleasant idyllic spot surrounded by modernity yet somehow also removed. People come, and send their children to enter the past and hopefully learn of the lifeways of the common colonial folk that once lived in the area. This reason for visiting the farm is, at least, the one most commonly stated. But perhaps we need to look a little deeper.

Toward this end, it is our belief that we study the past to learn from it. Many modern artifacts that litter public and private spaces in this very city carry stearn warnings about this for all to see- such phrases as, "The Past is Prologue," "Those That Do Not Seek To Understand The Past Are Condemned To Repeat It," and so on, and so on. Only days ago, the symbolism of the past swept under the carpet yet re-emerging to haunt us has been consecrated for the nation to see and contemplate. Needless to say, the view of the past serving to guide the present is common and one of the reasons we devote so many resources and so much time toward understanding the past ourselves and to also help our children understand and hopefully appreciate the past. As an archeologist, my everyday business is the past. Nothing wrong with that, I enjoy it, and so do many others. Standing in a square hole at the farm, with a relic in my hand, I attract more attention than their nicest Red Devon Colonial Cow. I unearth the past and everybody wants to see and touch it. It makes them feel good.

However, as archeology and archeologists have become more reflective about their pursuits, another, perhaps more important reason for maintaining the past has emerged. We now realize that the past is also somewhat of an opiate. That is, we see the past as representing simpler and more pure times.

In coming to the farm people enter the past and feel its soothing effects as they walk back into time and leave behind their apprehensions of and stresses from the modern complex world. They slip back into the pure and simple times of pre-Revolutionary War colonial agrarian America. I have a feeling that the further back in time one goes, the better the feeling.

I also rather doubt that the nature, that is the absolute authenticity of the past, much matters to the weary time traveler. This realization has caused some notable radicals to state, in contradiction to the beforementioned phrases on our monuments, that - "History is Bunk," or "History is Nothing but a Commonly Agreed Upon Lie," and so on, and so on. Henry Ford and Voltaire, respectively, were able to pierce our ideology about the past and expose if for what it is. My definition of the nasty word ideology sees it as something we view as real while in fact it is actually something that does not exist. In other words, much of the past we see, or at least we think we see, is just that - it is ideology, a creation of ourselves that never existed. That is, we parade an ideological past in front of our children as they are herded through this particular living historical farm as well as almost all others. I also have little doubt that it is an ideological past that faces them in their textbooks. I have absolutely no doubt that they face an ideological past when they learn about American Indian history.

To perhaps clarify the problem at hand a bit more, I would like to briefly look at a phenomenon of today's culture which goes in an opposite, yet similar direction as archeology. This phenomenon is, at least in its basic precepts, closely related to archeology and certainly influences the perceptions of ourselves and our children. The phenomenon I am speaking of is science fiction and it most often appears in the medium of literature and/or film. As

archeology peers back into time, science fiction gazes forward, into the future. If we could put Carl Sagan or Steven Spielberg on the proverbial couch and confront their reasons for taking us into the future, I feel certain that their ultimate goal is to help us, at least metaphysically, contact and learn from extra-terrestrials that have evolved through the problems of our world. We could learn from them, just as we could learn from the archeologist's past, and hopefully bring about a better today. However, E.T. comes to help but few listen. Colonial America is also there at the farm to help us but few can see it. We carry too much cultural baggage about the mythical past to listen to and see the real past. Now, returning to earth, where does this leave us?

Some of my colleagues would bluntly tell you that we can never know the real past. Whether you agree or not is up to you and will not be debated here. I, myself, however, am fairly certain that we can know the past or at least a significant part of the past. Archeologists, being somewhat clever individiuals, unearth the real past and offer it up for all to scrutenize. Hardly a week goes by without something significant being discovered and reported upon. These findings somewhat startle us and often force scholars to realign their thinking about the past. No doubt our views of the past will always be changing, however, this is a good quality of a healthy science and is nothing to fear. I must also state, with some pride, that archeology is one of the few disciplines that goes out with the intent and ability to uncover the past of the full spectrum of life— from the lower rungs of society to the top and everything in between. As the archeologist roots around, for what one scholar has labelled "small things forgotten," the story of people who left no written records and also those that left records which lie, come to the surface. I do not think that I need to go

into now archeology everyday alters our perceptions of the past. This is what we do best and the evidence of our successes is being presented in many of the sessions of this meeting.

The real problem for us to figure out is how to get real knowledge of the past to those who need it. We have a delivery problem and I take solving this problem to be one of the primary goals of this symposium. Therefore, in the last portion of my paper I would like to relate how we might go about getting the public, especially the middle school child, to check their cultural and ideological baggage at the gate and see and learn from the real past. This should be our goal. And if the farm did not show me the real past, it did give me clues as to how to access it for myself as well as the children and adults who visited the farm.

Our first step is to realize that we and our children's past is most often an artifact of ourselves. To go back to the real past we need to first go in— we need to realize that the familar past is illusory. Just as the pretty Indian maidden on television that announces "you call it corn, we call it maize" but please buy our butter is an illusion of our society, so is the past that most see at the farm. It is the result of a complex mental process conditioned by our society that I could not even begin to outline in my alotted time today.

However, once we realize and point out this fact, the key to real understanding is at hand. If archeology can expose the maize woman for what she really is, we are on our way to significant learning. That is, when people, especially children, are forced to confront the ideologies they bring with them with real information they clearly see the conflict between their previous

misconception and their new found knowledge. As one philosopher put it, out of conflict always emerges change. That is, they learn.

For instance, near the farm live a group of people who say they are Indians and who are trying to reconstitute their tribe. These are the Piscataway. People that often come in contact with them do not view them as Indians. They just do not look like the maize woman on the television and on the butter box. Yet, when it is explained to them that maybe being an Indian has more to do with a way-of-life or cultural tradition then with genetic purity, they appreciate the nature of their original misconception. They learn about reality.

Another example that I might cite is more directly related to the farm. One summer day an interpretor had been cooking some porridge over a fire in the summer kitchen. When finished, it was placed in a crock to cool on the table and it immediately attracted a rather large swarm of common flies. Some children walking up to the kitchen, no doubt secure in the pure and simple they thought they had entered, could not resist commenting on the unsanitary conditons wrought by the situation in front of them. This allowed the interpretor to enter into a dialogue with them about the 18th century and its lack of any real concept of a germ theory. Information uncovered by archeologists was discussed. The children learned of how archeologiacl research often isolated privies next to drinking wells and how the resulting recycling system demonstrated a lack of knowledge about germs or more correctly bacterial infusion. If you are not worried about germs, why worry about flies. After all, they really do not eat much.

In short, here again the children confronted their ideology of the past with real knowledge about the past and came away with significant insight and understanding. Several other archeologists working in similar living history situations have viewed similar or identical scenes and have labelled this process cultural separation. I, as do they, feel that these cultural separations are the real key to effective presentation of and learning about the past. If they do not occur, the visitor leaves the farm (or the textbook) nodding that the past was really like they always thought it was. That is, they do not see the real past- they only reconfirm the myth which came with them.

Concluding, the things remembered at the farm stimulate little thought and hence give no real understanding of the past. The instances of cultural separation, however, force one to confront what is in mind with the reality of the true past. This is the key to effective learning and, of course, effective teaching. It is the key to truly educating middle school children about the authentic past. If we fail to do this, we reify a misconceived reality about a false past thereby ultimately enlarging the confusion of the present.

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